

Equipoise and Skepticism: Past, Present and Future

Currently, the predominant view in research ethics maintains that physicians can morally justify offering randomized clinical trial enrollment to their patients only if some form of equipoise is present. Thus, the physician must experience (either individually or communally) a state of reasoned uncertainty concerning the relative merits of two or more competing treatments for a given disease before she may recommend that her patient participate in a clinical trial. Increasingly, however, this position has been subject to critical attention and considerable negative scrutiny. My argument engages this trend by turning to the history of philosophy; here I claim that the use of the term “equipoise” in the medical research context is extremely similar to terms and concepts from the philosophical tradition of skepticism, and as a result of this similarity it is possible to understand the principle of equipoise’s vulnerability to already published criticisms. A comparison of the criticisms of equipoise within the medical research literature to criticisms of philosophical skepticism reveals a potentially grim future for equipoise as a legitimate guiding principle for the ethical conduct of clinical research.